

Rev. Dan Welch Christmas Eve 12-24-22 Text- Isaiah 9:1-7 “Glorious Light”
Charles Dickens’ novel, A Christmas Carol, is about Ebenezer

Scrooge and how his heart was changed one Christmas. It’s a story that makes us feel good because “they all lived happily ever after.” But the lines from another one of Dickens’ novels more accurately describe the way Christmas feels for many of us. He begins A Tale of Two Cities with these infamous words:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness. It was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity. It was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness. It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. We had everything before us and we had nothing before us.

Christmas is a time of contrasts. It’s a time of prosperity and a time of poverty. It’s a season of good will and a season of ugly greed. Christmas is a time of family togetherness and a time of excruciating loneliness. It’s a season of light and it’s a season of darkness. Christmas is the spring of hope and Christmas is the winter of intense despair.

Don't get me wrong. We all want Christmas to be the best of times. That's why we decorate and donate, and shop until we drop. We put up trees, hang tinsel, cook turkeys and put together all kinds of toys. We all want a holly, jolly Christmas. But let's be honest. As much as we want Christmas to be the best of times, sometimes it is the worst of times.

Our reading from Isaiah 9 resonates with *A Tale of Two Cities*. The prophet's message is also one of contrasts—it was the season of light and the season of darkness. “The people who walked in darkness ... those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness” (Isaiah 9:2). The people sitting in the dark included the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali—the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles (Isaiah 9:1). Zebulun and Naphtali were two of Jacob's twelve sons who went down to Egypt where, along with their brothers, they became a great nation. After 430 years, God rescued them and, after another forty years, gave them their inheritance in the Promised Land—beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles.

Fast-forward 700 years to Isaiah's day when the Assyrian army attacked these northern tribes, defeated their armies, leveled their cities

and exiled many of them to distant lands. It was the worst of times!
Zebulun and Naphtali walked in darkness and dwelt in a land of deep
darkness.

We all know about deep darkness! Some have spent too much
money, again, and we are worried sick about our financial future. Others
are struggling with health, or the health of a loved one—wondering if this
might be their last Christmas. Some are wrestling with old hurts that
won't heal and new wounds that won't go away. Still others are missing
loved ones this Christmas—because of distance, because of death, or
because of cruel design.

There is an even more foreboding darkness. John 3:19 explains it
this way, “This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but people
loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.” Too often,
we love the darkness of self-centered narcissism; live in the darkness of
lies and half-truths; and long for more of the darkness that feeds the
sinful desires of our flesh.

Is this the end of the story? Not on your life! Here is all of Isaiah 9:2, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” (Isaiah 9:2). This is not just any ordinary light. Isaiah calls it a great light!

The first light to shine in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali was Gideon, who defeated 120,000 Midianites with his army of 300 men. Judges 7:20 describes it this way, “Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, they shouted, ‘A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!’” Three hundred torches! What a light!

Soon another light would shine on Zebulun and Naphtali. King Josiah marched north with the burning torch of his newfound scroll of God’s Word (2 Kings 23:19). “A lamp to his feet and a light for his path” (Psalm 119:105). Josiah reclaimed Zebulun and Naphtali, reformed their worship and renewed their faith with God’s powerful Word! What a light!

The *great* light, however, was yet to appear. “To us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will

be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (v. 6). Majesty in the midst of the mundane. Holiness in the middle of cattle manure. Divinity entering the world on the floor of a stable, through the womb of a young lady and in the presence of a carpenter.

Jesus is the Light that took on flesh so that He might take you into His arms, heal your hurts, forgive your sin and destroy your darkness. Jesus took on flesh—not to demonstrate the innocence of infancy—but in order to live the life we *could* not and die our death so we *need* not. Jesus is dazzling light, brilliant light, eternal light. No wonder the Nicene Creed declares that Jesus is “Light of light!”

With Gideon, the light burned out in the apostasy of Baal worship and in the anarchy of his son Abimelech (Judges 8–9). With Josiah, the light burned out in his death at the hands of Pharaoh Necho at the Battle of Megiddo (2 Kings 23:29). Would the light of Jesus burn out as well? Would it cease to shine for all time? Would the betrayal, the blood and the burial be the final curtain call? Is this the end of the story? Not on your life!

“Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end” (v. 7). Did you hear that? No end! The grave held Jesus for three days. Now He is alive, His promises are sure, His light shines. There will be no end to His love!

On December 17, 1903, Orville and Wilber Wright got their flying machine off the ground. The airplane was born! In their excitement, they sent a telegraph to their sister Katherine. It said, “Flew 120 feet. Will be home for Christmas.” When Katherine got the news, she ran to the local newspaper in Dayton, Ohio, and showed the telegraph to the editor. He glanced at it and then said, “How nice, the boys will be home for Christmas.” He completely missed the point! Yes, it was nice that Orville and Wilber would be home for Christmas, but a person had flown in an airplane for the first time. That was big news!

How often do we miss the big news at Christmas? We get caught up in the tinsel and toys, the trees and all the trimmings. Those things are nice. Just like it was nice that the Wright brothers would be home for Christmas, but that’s not the big news. The big news of Christmas is that

God took flight. Did He ever! God took flight and traveled from heaven to earth.

Whether tonight is for you the best of times or the worst of times, the spring of hope or the winter of despair; the birth of Jesus—foretold by Isaiah, announced by the angels, witnessed by the shepherds and marveled at by the magi—leaves us with this good news of great joy. And what would that be? “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” Amen.